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Implications for International Relations by Katerina Dalacoura
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Islam, Liberalism, and Human Rights: Implications for International Relations by Katerina Dalacoura (revised edition). London: I.B. Tauris, 2003. 248pp.

Writing in Islam, Liberalism, and Human Rights, Katerina Dalacoura describes her work as “a book on human rights as a value and norm in international relations and of Islam as constituent of political cultures in particular societies. It studies human right and Islam as two separate issues but also highlights their interaction.” The work also seeks to support the concept of human rights through discrediting the cultural elitist thesis and dispel the stereotypical image of Islam as inherently rigid and inflexible.

Dalacoura’s text is particular useful for its instructive starting point. To begin with, she poses the question of what defines Islam. In doing so, she immediately puts herself in the midst of the problem: which definition is the correct one?

Distinctions in definitions can and should be made. For instance, Dalacoura says that Islam can be clarified as not being either Islamism or Islamists—those who argue that Islam must form a part of the political process and the moral foundation for society. Islamists, in turn, can be divided into two groups: liberals and fundamentalists. The former believe that Islam and human rights can be reconciled and give equal value to both, whereas the latter are preoccupied with safeguarding the purity of the religion as they understand it.

Arguably, this particular distinction of Dalacoura’s is essential for analytic purposes, even if it does not correspond neatly to reality. In fact, in my opinion, this distinction is possible because a range of views can exist between the two positions; in fact, Islamists shift and reformulate their positions under the influence of a multiplicity of factors, including those of authenticity and modernity.

This treatment of Islam provides a foundation for Dalacoura’s extended discussion of the religion’s linkages with modern human rights conceptions. Clearly, the argument has been made that it is possible, at an abstract level of ideas, to incorporate the concepts of human rights within an Islamic worldview. Yet this exercise requires several suppositions including a revision of the traditional understanding of Islam, an emphasis on some elements in the Koran that are conducive to a liberal spirit, and a firm acceptance of the historicity of the text. Case studies of specific countries become significant only if liberalism in their respective political cultures is emphasized.

Additionally, it is possible to tie in the concept of human rights but only human rights divorced from secularism; hence leaving human rights that derive from the natural law position. This allows human rights to fit within a religious tradition and particularly, Islam.

But this position also requires the revision of premises from which the argument starts. For example, it requires a rejection of what has been called the “Manichean” view of Islam, which is essentially a rejection of the way Islam is understood per se. Emphasizing only parts of the Koran, as opposed to the work in its entirety is problematic at best. The importance of a historical context for any work can be stressed enough but that does not equate to accepting the historicity and limited applicability such a stress implies.

One cannot, for example, argue that liberalism is inherent in a tradition that has long been conservative. Even within the time of this writing, the Iranian Islamic Republic has shifted its

political tides with the ouster of its liberals and replacement by conservatives in its government. In large measure, this reflects a desire on the part of the people of Iran for a more traditional, as opposed to a liberal, leadership. This is a position consistent with the common view (or the Manichean view) of Islam.

A final point here lies in the connection of Dalacoura's argument with implications for the study of international relations. There are four:

- the discipline's recent concern with communitarianism is misplaced since our understanding of community is not a static one;
- that political culture needs to be reemphasized, not as an analytic tool, but rather by focusing on the role of political agency and the use to which political agents put culture;
- the idea that universalization of human rights as a part of the process of globalization is ill-founded. Since globalization does not surpass the state and the spread of human rights is not a unilinear process, it is possible that both trends may be reversed; and
- the state-centric model continues to be the framework for which norms and values, including human rights, will be worked out in.

These implications are troublesome to some international relations scholars and practitioners. Setting aside the various schools in both international politics and comparative politics subfields, the claim that globalization can be undone seems naïve at best. It is clear that the connections between political and economic systems, increasingly by the Internet and networked systems, are growing closer and closer together. And with them, events and activities that occur in one part of the world have also have implications for other parts as well.

In sum, Dalacoura poses some interesting questions about the nature and culture of Islam and how, if at all, that culture connects to liberalism and corresponding concerns of human rights. The replies she provides however, fail to answer those questions in a satisfactory manner.

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